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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In candidacy for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts

Manifestations of Nature

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*To my wonderful Jesse, for always
keeping me sane and laughing.*

Abstract

I feel that humans in today's society are distanced so much from their origins that we need to be reminded that our roots are deeply and firmly planted in the natural world. I feel that it is our society's current disconnection and alienation from nature that is a key reason we have let the destruction of the environment go on for so long. This thesis consists of two parts. The first being a written investigation of the root causes of our society's current alienation from nature and the second being a written account of the exhibition of a body of sculpture that aims to raise questions about our relationship to and awareness of the natural world in hopes of fostering a much needed reconnection.

Part 1

Rooted in Nature

“Human beings will be happier not when they cure cancer or get to mars or eliminate racial prejudice or flush Lake Erie, but when they find ways to inhabit primitive communities again. That’s my utopia.”

-Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

For most of the ten million years of our evolution, humans have lived in small mobile groups employing the skills of hunting and gathering to obtain our subsistence. This was the most flexible way of life adopted by humans and the one which caused the least amount of damage to the ecosystem (Ponting, pg 18). In this way of life, humans were completely intertwined with the environment. We knew all the intricacies of the changing of the seasons, the behavior of the animals and the cycles of the plants and trees. It was integral to our survival to know which fruit trees would yield first, which plants were poisonous and where and when one could find animals to hunt and water to drink. Early humans had amazingly complex and accurate mental maps of their environments. “In her book *The Harmless People*, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas tells how a !Kung man walked straight to a spot in a barren plain with not a bush or a tree for reference where he pointed to a blade of grass with a tiny thread of vine wrapped around it. He knew that vine from months before when it grew green from the rainy season. Now

that it was dry and he was thirsty, he dug at the spot, exposed a juicy root about two feet down, and quenched his thirst”(Mason, pg 58).

Human population at that time was dependent on how many the ecosystem could successfully sustain and therefore was “kept in check” so to speak by the resources that were available in the environment. Studies of some of the few remaining groups left tell us that hunter gatherers both contemporary and historical have even tried to control their own populations so as not to overtax the resources their ecosystem could provide. Our early ancestors knew how delicate a balancing act the environment was because they were so intimately tied to it and aware of it (Ponting, pg 23). They realized that their presence had an impact and they took steps to ensure that a balance was always maintained between what they took and what was available.

In terms of their relationship to the natural world a lot of these early societies had an almost religious connection to the rest of nature, and lakes, rivers and forests but mainly animals were endowed with souls of their own. Animals were seen as kin and as teachers and thus gave us a crucial bond and a sense of belonging and were used for our benefit only after appeasing the spirit of the animal in some form of ritual, dependent upon the culture, but always as an act of respect and appreciation. Nature to these early humans was something to be worshipped and respected for it was on the same level as man himself. Man held the rest of nature in high regard and was in awe of its beauty and mystery.

Ruling Over Nature

In the last ten thousand years, however, a very different way of life developed which has allowed the world's populations to soar and changed our views of nature as well as our effect upon it. Agriculture slowly became the new way of life and was based on the alteration of the natural environment in order to produce crops and provide pastures for animals. Agriculture involves clearing the existing natural ecosystem and creating an artificial habitat where humans can grow and sustain the plants and animals of their choosing. It was and is common for a farmer to take a plot of land, rich with diversity and teeming with life, clear cut it and in its place plant a single species of plant. The agricultural way of life established a constant battle with nature to ensure that crops succeeded. Agriculture aims to squeeze the most amount of subsistence out of the least amount of land. Animals were no longer seen as kin but rather as pests or as property. In this mentality, any species that interfered with the successful cultivation of the chosen crop was deemed a pest and therefore obliterated and those animals that proved themselves useful to this cultivation were put to work. Animal herding, agriculture's bedfellow, was the "deliberate control of the mobility, diet, growth and reproductive lives of animals" (Mason, pg122). Animals were domesticated not only to serve as slaves for the plowing of fields, but also to serve as food and thus the taming and breeding of animals, such as sheep, cattle, camels and deer became a substitution for hunting.

Agriculture set up a war between man and the rest of nature in which he was constantly fighting and or taming nature in order to get what he needed to survive. We began to see ourselves as masters over nature because in order to get what we wanted

from it, we had to have complete control over it. “Controlling nature is second nature to us. We are a people of and agrarian culture, and we have the eyes, ears, hearts and minds of agriculturalists. Jim Mason, author of *An Unnatural Order* writes: “Whether or not you have ever been a farmer, or even a visitor at a farm, if you are a Westerner you are imbued with the culture of the farmer and it determines virtually everything you know and think about the world around you” (pg 68). I realize that every time I’ve pulled up a weed or swatted at a harmless insect with no thought of its importance I have exercised this mentality. The adoption of agriculture and animal husbandry made us feel as if we were the rulers over nature and once we began to feel superior we started to lose interest in those things that were below us and that didn’t directly benefit us. There was no longer awe and reverence towards the natural world, but rather a feeling of dominance toward nature, and this I believe to be the point at which our disconnection from the natural world began.

Unlike in the days of hunting and gathering, it was now possible to sustain vast populations on a relatively small area of land. The mobile groups that once roamed the earth in search of their subsistence were now tied to the land which they farmed. People began to settle around agricultural belts and thus, civilizations developed.

The adoption of agriculture is considered by some to be the greatest mistake of the human species. Humans before agriculture were required to be hyperaware of the every aspect of the natural world around them. They were in awe of its beauty and they depended upon knowing its intricacies and working with it, not against it, to survive. Their subsistence was reliant upon what already existed in nature and therefore, their numbers were in direct correlation to what and how much food was available to them

from their surrounding environment. Agriculture, on the other hand was about human beings being able to control nature and to make it yield more than it naturally would yield. It has allowed our population to explode to the point that the earth is being damaged by our presence because now our numbers are dependent, not on what nature, itself, can yield but, rather, what we ourselves can force it to yield.

We are a hard working, and inventive species with the mindset that, nature is something to be conquered, and we have been quite successful at it. We have been conquering nature so much and for so long that our species has been likened to a parasite or cancer that is rapidly spreading, and destroying its host, the earth, in the process. “The struggle merely to support today’s population at today’s standards of living is causing environmental destruction on a scale and at a pace unprecedented in human history. Accelerating degradation and deforestation of land, depletion of groundwater, toxic pollution, biodiversity loss, and massive atmospheric disruption are wrecking the planet’s machinery for producing the basic material ingredients of human well-being” (Concrete Jungle, pg 11). The mentality of an agrarian society sees nature as merely resources to be tapped for the benefit of the human species and thus today’s society sees no need to maintain balance between our needs and the needs of the ecosystem. There seems to be little attention paid by the majority of our society to the disruption and damage to the environment that is caused by humans simply trying to sustain their ever increasing population.

Sadly, just when it is becoming urgently crucial for our species to reconnect with the awareness of the environment we once had, we are becoming increasingly alienated and disconnected from nature. Generation after generation is losing

their first hand knowledge and direct interaction with the natural world. The reasons for this disconnection are as complex and diverse as nature it self but are rooted and connected all the way back ten thousand years ago to our adoption of an agricultural way of life.

My parent's generation spent most of their time outdoors unsupervised by their parents playing in the woods, building tree houses and discovering nature for themselves. This freedom to explore was an amazing opportunity to develop a genuine love of nature. The first hand knowledge of their own "stomping grounds" was probably similar to the way in which our ancestors who gathered and hunted for their subsistence knew the land they lived on. I myself had similar freedom to roam the woods around my house but it seems as if the children growing up today have very little direct contact with nature. Maybe it's the fear of child molesters or kid-knappers that forces today's parents to keep tight reigns on their children, their leashes short enough to keep them safely indoors. Maybe all the technological entertainment that is so readily available and sought after is enticing them to stay inside. Maybe it's the fact that more and more of us are living in urban environments and thus losing our access to nature. Regardless of the reason it is becoming more and more apparent that kids just don't play outside as much as they used to and therefore, one on one, personal interaction between children today and the natural world is dwindling. It is our children who are in line to be the next stewards of the earth and whether they are prepared or not to deal with the problems remains to be seen.

Most children of today know more about the Amazon rain forest then they do about the world that exists just outside their door because of all the Television watching they are doing. A conversation I had recently with one of my Aunts on this very subject

was revealing. We were talking about her youngest son Xavier and she proceeded to tell me how he was really interested in nature. “He really loves animals, and he especially loves to watch birds.” Already somewhat anticipating what the answer would be, I asked her. “Does he play outside a lot?” “No” she said, surprisingly nonchalant. “he watches a lot of nature shows on T.V.”

Television, not direct experience, is giving our children, their knowledge of the natural world (Louv, pg 56). This is obviously wrought with problems. For one, television only caters to the visual and auditory senses and thus this sort of experience of nature is, of course, sub par. Also, nature on television is experienced at a much faster pace than nature actually moves and this gives kids a false sense of the reality of the way it really works. In order to captivate the audience, hours upon hours of filming are edited in order to give the viewer the most exciting bits and pieces of events. A nature photographer for one of these programs can sit in a blind out in the wilderness for two months straight trying to capture enough footage of a lion, for instance, to fill a sixty minute time slot. After editing out most of those two months of footage what we are left with, for ratings sake of course, is one full hour of fast-paced, captivating and thrilling footage. Children watch these shows and think that this excitement is what nature really is when, in reality, the hours upon hours of the photographer’s time spent in the blind, waiting for something exciting to happen are what is more accurately telling of the actual pace of the natural world. After watching shows such as this, children then, by contrast, are bored when they go outside to their backyard and don’t see anything as exciting as a lion attacking a gazelle right before their very eyes. Will a nature-alienated child grow into an environmentally concerned adult? We can not afford this disconnection and all

this knowledge learned through television could be nurtured and made well-rounded if we ourselves and our children again look to the natural world as our kin and as our teacher. If in our day to day lives we pay attention to the beauty of the natural world and hold it in the highest esteem once more then maybe we will be able to reach some sort of balance between the needs of our species and the health of the earth.

Part 2

As a Child

I have always, since childhood, been utterly fascinated with nature. I grew up on a small farm that my grandfather built and I was exposed to many things that instilled an insatiable curiosity and drive to learn and to understand the world around me. I, from a very young age, have always been a seeker, trying to find things previously unknown to me. Having a huge wooded area to play in on my property, I was always exploring and looking for fascinating things. I was interested in understanding how life worked, what shapes it took, and the mechanics of its movement. On any given day one could find me turning over rocks to find pill bugs and centipedes or splashing around in the creek trying to catch crayfish. I was amazed by the variety of forms I found in nature and equally intrigued when I saw the similarities very different forms can share. I would make dandelion necklaces, and catch grasshoppers and frogs in my daily outdoor adventures. I was most attracted to the small scale things I found in nature, those things that needed to be examined closely in order to be understood and I would most often seek out those things that were the smallest in scale. Tiny insects, peering into the depths of flowers to find their delicate internal parts, as well as finding seed and animal eggs and imagining what might someday emerge from them, fueled my imagination and also inspired my visual aesthetic as I grew older and began to create. I was definitely attracted to the forms, colors and textures of these manifestations of nature in an artistic sense, but there was part of me that was intrigued by the mysteriousness of these things that were so small

and yet so unbelievably perfect. At times I felt as if I had found a precious treasure that no one else had ever laid their eyes on before and so I was always looking to find something amazing. I have to say, nature consistently rewarded me for paying attention. These very early and very direct experiences of nature proved to be very influential and I would draw upon that childhood sense of discovery often throughout the course of my artistic endeavors.

Growing up on a farm shaped my perceptions of nature in countless ways. I did not start to think about the impact agriculture had upon our perception of nature until I started to research our disconnection from the natural world and feel as though, ironically, my own connection to nature is due largely to the fact I was raised on a farm. Unlike some of the kids that I grew up with and a great deal of American children today, I was very aware of where the food I ate came from. I grew up knowing that the milk I drank and the meat I ate came from the cows, chickens and pigs we raised out back and not from the shelves of the grocery store. We gathered eggs from our chickens and ate vegetables straight from the garden. I learned that I could suck the sweet nectar from the trumpet flowers in the front yard from the time I spent with my grandmother, watching the hummingbirds do the very same and that the bees were so intent on going about their business of pollination that they didn't much mind when I would pet their soft furry backs. I was amazed by everything I saw.

From a very young age I saw the births and deaths of many animals. I have seen chicks hatch before my very eyes and have also seen my grandfather behead, pluck and disembowel many a chicken that would be cooked and served to us for dinner later that same night. One of my earliest memories is of my grandfather giving me a chicken heart

to hold that he had just removed from the chicken as he prepared it to be cooked. I must have been three years old but the memory of its wet warmth in my hand still sticks with me and I'm sure, in many ways, it has influenced my fascination with biological systems of the body and how they function.

As I grew older and started making friends through school, inevitably I was exposed to the varying lifestyles of the group of kids I spent the most time with. I became very aware of the fact that not every one had the same kind of childhood as I had experienced. Although I lived on a small farm the rest of my town was an exploding suburb. We watched our streets population rapidly increase and the land we depended on for hay to feed our livestock disappear. In its place rose hundreds of cookie cutter suburban homes occupied by well-off couples with two kids and a golden retriever. Developments with names like "Forest Stream" had no forest and no stream, only huge, beautiful, yet poorly constructed homes sitting on less than one acre of land which was pristinely groomed and landscaped to perfection. I made many friends in these neighborhoods and realized that my lifestyle was completely foreign to some of them. Although I spent some time inside watching television as I think most of my generation did, I also spent a lot of time running around after school with my brothers. A lot of my friends, in contrast, stayed inside a lot of the time watching television or playing video games. With barely enough room in their yards to play catch after the in ground pool had been installed, the perfectly cut grass and well planned flowerbeds of their backyards were a far cry from the natural world I knew, playing in the woods and experiencing life on a farm. I feel now, looking back, that the way I grew up, put me in a prime position to understand our changing perceptions of nature. I was aware of my own encounters with

the natural world at the same time I was aware of the fact that many kids my age were rarely encountering nature at all.

As an Artist

“It is perhaps the primary purpose of art to enhance our awareness of the true nature of things. The artist holds up to the world a lens through which is refracted a reality that is concealed from our everyday perception”

-Mel Gooding co-author of *Artist Land Nature*

In the span of my life, a very short time in relation to the whole of human history, I feel that I have personally witnessed the disconnection that characterizes our society's current relationship to nature and have tried to understand the historical roots of this change. I realize that the account of this history, contained in the preceding pages, leaves out many things, for just like every aspect of nature the issues related to this topic are complex and layered. I realize that there is much left to be said about the effects of industrialization, consumerism and the technological revolution and I do not pretend to have all the answers. I only hope, as an artist, to contribute positively to the direction of our species and our attitudes about nature. John K. Grande, author of *Balance: Art and Nature*, states that art could play a leading role in the future of our society if our artists accepted the importance of studying nature, and recognized their own place within an ecosystem (pg 38). I realize that it is not enough for me to make work only to fulfill my need to create, but that through exhibition I have the opportunity to connect with and speak to an audience. I feel the most important and incidentally, one of the simplest

things we can do as a society to ensure a future that involves a symbiotic relationship with the rest of nature is to stop overlooking it and to pay attention to its intricacies. By realizing the importance of every single creature in terms of its place in the ecosystem, finding awe within the beauty and complexity of its forms as well as understanding that we are no more important than any other species on earth a new awareness will begin to take hold in our society. Once we start to pay attention to the natural world in our day to day lives the environmental issues stemming from human activity that have gone on so long, with their effects unnoticed, will become more apparent and once we reestablish the deep connection and kinship with nature, that we once had, how could we knowingly continue destroying it.

I feel a strong kinship with our early ancestors who painted the cave walls at Lascaux because humans since our earliest days have been creating art that looks to nature for its inspiration. We evolved in response to the natural world and it inspired our creativity, sparked our inventiveness and nurtured our conception of beauty. I think about my place on this evolutionary timeline and I see myself as a human, living ten million years since we branched off from the apes, making work that is strongly rooted in the natural world as an expression of my reverence for nature, but also a reaction to our society's cultural conceptions of nature. Having always been fascinated with the forms I found in my environment it was not until graduate school that I started collecting these natural objects. I found a few dead insects on the windowsill of my space the first year and, decided to keep them because they were so beautiful and interesting. From that moment on I started collecting all of the fascinating things I found in nature. The sculpture began to develop around this collection that I was always adding to as I reached

out in many directions that first year, to figure out exactly what it was that I wanted to say and what the best way was to go about saying it. Prior to graduate school the work I had done was also based on nature but was extremely processed oriented and more concerned with technique and formal aesthetics then with content. Content was always a part of the equation but it was definitely an unbalanced equation and it was as if the ideas informing the work were floating high above the place where the work was being created. Graduate school helped me to bring the two into a more balanced relationship. Although my experiences throughout the course of the two years that I attended seemed very scattered and fractured it is apparent to me now that the difficulty I endured has made me a better artist, and for that I am grateful. In the beginning I was forced away from my comfort zone in terms of both idea and technique and encouraged to find new ways in which to work. I was encouraged to let the process serve the idea and thus was able to expand my technical arsenal as well as explore media other than clay. Where I once chose processes based purely on the level of satisfaction I found in the particular technique I was now exploring new processes trying to find which one would best serve the idea. This exploration of alternative materials also made me question my use of clay and the appropriateness of the medium in relation to the ideas I was trying to convey. Working with other materials helped me to more fully understand the reasons I am so drawn to clay as a sculptural medium. Its' ability to take on so many different characteristics makes it the most logical material with which to attempt to represent the tremendous variety of forms found within the natural world. Clay can amazingly convey both the softness and delicate nature of a flower petal and the jagged hardness of a mountainous landscape. It can take on the rough texture of tree bark and be made as

smooth and shiny as the skin of an apple. The ways in which one can work with clay are endless and I am continually excited by the prospect of finding new and innovative processes with which to manifest forms and feel as though a life time worth of exploration could never exhaust the versatility of this medium.

This new way of working and understanding of the medium opened up a world of possibilities and I explored many of them in that first year, always feeling as if my efforts were futile and the work fruitless. In hindsight, I realize that all the avenues I took which felt like they went nowhere, all built upon themselves and informed each other. Whether I was exploring the jewel like presentation of tiny hand-carved seed forms, making a four foot sculpture depicting an ant or creating reliquaries to house specimens from my collection, the overriding intention of the work was an attempt to make nature precious and to evoke feeling of reverence towards it.

Influences

Until graduate school I had never looked very far outside of myself to gain insight into my work. I began to immerse myself in other artists whose work I felt related to mine and for purposes of brevity I will only mention the ones who I feel are achieving in their work, that which I aim to achieve in mine. I am intrigued by the work of Andy Goldsworthy because his love and veneration for nature as well as an intense creative drive has led to amazingly beautiful sculptural works that illustrate an intimate and respectful relationship between man and nature. His work reminds us of how awe-inspiring the natural world is. “For Goldsworthy a work made in the landscape, no matter

how modest or fleeting, is a token of man's presence in nature" (Hand to Earth, pg 53).

At the very heart of this work is his intense connection to the natural world. He thrives on a direct interaction with nature and it is not uncommon for him to spend weeks or months getting to know the subtleties of the landscape and environment before he begins to create. In order for him to use his "material" which is literally the stuff of nature he must first understand the way in which it works. "Grass stalks are thin and flexible at the growing end, stiff and prone to bend into sharp angles at the base: they tell the artist what he can do with them" (Hand to Earth, pg 20). Goldsworthy's seemingly endless choice of natural materials: water, wood, stone, leaves, grass, snow and ice, petals, feathers and twigs, brings him to an understanding of the natural world as a whole by way of each individual material. He often discovers similarities between very different materials and gains insight into the way in which nature manifests itself as a whole. "When I'm working with materials it's not just the leaf or the stone it's the processes that are behind them that are important. That's what I'm trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole." He says of the "snake like" forms that so often recur in his work: "Some works have qualities of snaking but are not snakes. The form is shaped through a similar response to environment. The snake has evolved through a need to move close to the ground, sometimes below and sometimes, above, an expression of the space it occupies. This is a potent and recurring form in nature which I have explored through working in bracken, snow, sand, leaves, grass, trees, earth. It is the ridge of a mountain, the root of a tree, a river finding its way down a valley" (Collaboration, pg 4).

In the process of creating a work Goldsworthy must be completely aware of not only the work in front of him but also the way in which the wind is blowing, how hot the

sun is shining and what the clouds rolling in above him may be holding. For a strong gust of wind can easily destroy a reed structure hanging from a tree, delicately pinned together with thorns, and the sun that so beautifully illuminates one of his ice sculptures can also melt it and cause its collapse. He says: “Sometimes a work is at its best when most threatened by the weather. A balanced rock is given enormous tension and force by a wind that might cause its collapse. “I have worked with colorful leaves, delicate grasses and feathers made extra vivid by a dark, rain-laden sky that cast no shadow. Had it rained, the work would have become mud-splattered and been washed away”

(Collaboration, pg 2). This aspect of the work, quite literally, exemplifies the delicate and often fleeting nature of the natural world. Goldsworthy often feels the need to work in a wide range of scales in order to reflect what he finds in nature and often, working on a small scale can energize a move to work on a larger scale. “one scale releases energy for the other”(Collaboration, pg 3). He has dedicated his life and career to the understanding of the natural environment and the sculptures that arise from this collaboration are an ultimate display of human respect for nature. They successfully do that which I myself am attempting to do and that is conjure up a respect and connection to nature by enticing us to look close and discover that which is always there but often overlooked.

The work of Chris Drury is similar to Goldsworthy in that it stems from a deep and very personal connection to the natural world. Like Goldsworthy, Drury often works directly with the materials of nature out in the environment. Drury’s shelters call to mind Goldsworthy’s stone stacks and the way in which Goldsworthy creates his *leaf works* is similar to the way in which Drury constructed his *Basket for The Crows*. It seems quite fitting that these two artists so intent on discovering the intricacies of nature would create

similar forms. To me it only reinforces the fact that an intimate connection with nature allows one to discover truths about the way in which it works and, in turn, gives us insight into the way in which we work.

Drury's site specific works within the landscape, that speak of human culture using the materials of the natural world serve to remind us of our own origins in nature. The fact that there exists no separation between man and nature is a theme that Drury explores quite often through the construction of works made from nature that represent the products of human culture. Shelters, baskets, kayaks and cairns created from the materials he finds on the land are all objects that have been utilized by the human species since our beginnings and can be considered culture. Through his use of materials and the processes he employs, Drury's work bridges the perceived gap between nature and culture. "Some of his shelters are built in a random way, gathering whatever local materials are at hand, to make something that will be functional but imperfect, like a birds nest." While in his explorations that speak to human culture, "intricately woven baskets, kayaks and maps display his knowledge of weaving techniques and patterns from across the world." (Silent Spaces, pg11)

Of all of Drury's work, I find my thesis work to be most connected to *Medicine Wheel*. This work is a large circular object calendar filled with natural objects collected by Drury, one for each day of the year. This calendar becomes a physical documentation of the moment of discovery. "The finding of objects led me to link material and object to a found moment in time and space." It is this discovery of nature, this moment of awe and fascination when I come across a beautiful natural form that inspires my own work.

Mark Dion an avid nature lover and conservationist frequently addresses in his work, the human relationship to nature both historically and contemporarily. His work has been described as an inquiry into the history of representation and interpretation of nature by the triumvirate of science, popular culture and art (Mark Dion, pg 12).

For his installation entitled, *On Tropical Nature*, Dion, over a period of four weeks in the Orinoco River basin of Venezuela, collected natural specimens and sent them back to the gallery to be displayed on tables. He says of this exhibition; “*On Tropical Nature* opened with empty tables, signaling to the viewers that I was working somewhere but not in the exhibition space. I was in the jungle, sending specimens back to the gallery on a weekly basis, with the expectation that, based on my prior instructions, the tables would gradually become filled with the contents of my crates” (Mark Dion, pg 25). The act of collecting using the methodology of the naturalist becomes integral to the work and this particular installation, as well as Dion’s work that is inspired by his fascination with cabinets of curiosity were major influences on my decision about the inclusion of my own collection in my thesis exhibition.

Exhibition

“Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain.”

Henry David Thoreau

My thesis exhibition entitled *Manifestations of Nature* consisted of my personal collection of natural objects as well as sculpture created as a reaction to this collection. Canal Street Gallery, a renovated industrial space, was the ideal venue for my thesis exhibition because its location and aesthetic qualities were in such sharp contrast to the aesthetic qualities of the work. Located in the downtown area of the city of Rochester this large and somewhat cold and stark space with its concrete block walls, concrete floors and intricate network of overhead piping served to make the body of sculpture and collection of natural objects warm and inviting in comparison. By installing this work in an industrial setting I was trying to reinforce our urbanized modern society's divergence from nature through the aesthetic contrast between the architecture of the building and the organic qualities of the work. The use of intense spotlighting gave each sculpture an individuality and preciousness that served to draw the viewer into the work and encouraged one to spend time contemplating each piece one by one. The bright and focused light also helped the architecture of the space fade into the background and this

dimming, intensified ones focus and interaction with the work itself. Some of the wall work extended out into the space a few inches and this presentation, literally extended the sculpture out toward the viewer and helped to encourage a close investigation of each piece. The spotlights also threw beautiful and dynamic shadows on the wall that became part of the visual composition of the work.

As the intention of the thesis body of work was to raise questions about our society's relationship to and awareness of the natural world as well as to foster a much needed reconnection, I decided that the simplest and most direct means to that end would be to give the viewer the opportunity to view nature itself. Thus, the collection of actual natural objects preceded the rest of the sculpture in the show to denote the fact that it was the impetus or source of the work and also so that it was the first thing the viewer would encounter upon entering the exhibition space. I had no doubt that once given the opportunity to view these natural specimens with no distractions that the viewer would discover for themselves the same awe and respect that I have for them. I realized that, for me, the act of collecting itself is equivalent to worship and so I decided that exhibiting this collection would be a very telling way to express my own reverent attitude towards the natural world.

This installation, which shared its name with the title of the show, consisted of one hundred and seventy-nine glass specimen jars that contained the referential origins of all the sculptures I created for the exhibition. These relatively small jars, ranging in height from two inches to eight inches, were displayed on four, ash, wall shelves and contained a vast and diverse collection of natural objects I have found in my environment. A green metallic beetle, a white, sun bleached fish vertebrae, various seed

pods from a multitude of different plants, butterflies and dragonflies among many others each resided in their own jar. These jars reference, in appearance, scientific specimen jars in an effort to conjure ideas of examination. However, the presentation in glass jars was also akin to giving each object their own stage on which to be viewed and is in some ways reminiscent of the glass monstrance reliquaries that house religious relics meant to be viewed and worshiped. Taking these objects out of their natural environment, where they would easily get lost in the visual complexity of their surroundings, was in an effort to reveal that which is often overlooked in nature. The tiny snail shell that would rarely be seen in the visual complexity of its surroundings in the environment was now at eye level, spot lit and easily examined. All of its delicate intricacies of form and color were in plain sight. I use the term specimen interchangeably with natural object because the idea of specimen alludes to examination and analysis. It is this study of nature, particularly its structure and form that informed this work. Today's nature alienated society rushes about their day to day activities without much regard for the natural world, but here in the confines of the exhibition space all distractions were removed and the opportunity and time to reflect upon nature was available.

Nature is the ultimate expression of perfection and beauty and the sculptures created looking to these objects as their muse were not intended to in any way compete with nature or to copy it exactly but rather to exemplify one human's method of understanding it. Through the study of these natural specimens that are so small and intricate I began to better understand their structure and function. My attempts to newly manifest these forms in clay served to satisfy my own urge to create them, but also served as a method of revealing these tiny manifestations to the viewer. Because of my desire to

create work that reflected the variety and diversity of forms in nature I became proficient in many building techniques in order to most successfully realize each piece. I often found myself using many different building and forming techniques, from slabs and coils to molds and extrusions, within the same piece in order to capture the qualities contained of the specimen. In order to create the right surfaces, extensive glaze research was done to create an appropriate surface for each piece that best captured the surface qualities of the specimen I was using as a reference. It was also important to me to create a scale shift in order to imbue these works with a monumental quality, thereby rendering them less apt to be overlooked. *Pincher*, *Flower Remnant*, *Seed*, *Stem*, *Segment*, *Cluster*, *Lantern Pod*, *Star*, *Vertebrae*, *Pregnant Pod*, *Points of Connection* and *Magnolia* are all representational sculptures, created in clay, whose roots can be traced back to my collection of natural objects. *Pincher*, a four foot representation of a section of a crab claw, closely resembles the actual claw in form, surface and color. *Flower Remnant*, is displayed alone on a wall, extending out towards the viewer and represents the dried pod of a water lotus. Its, dark brown, bubbled surface evokes qualities of decay. *Seed*, does not have a specific referential specimen but rather is a reaction to my study of many seeds I have encountered and thus its form was derived from many different sources. *Stem*, a wall piece, which extends out towards the viewer with its undulating octopus like arms, references the stem found on the top of a tomato while *Segment*, among the smaller of the sculptures, is a magnification of a tiny black insect abdomen. *Cluster* references mushroom like flowers found in the woods of California and *Lantern Pod* a large and regal tripod sculpture is based on small and delicate seed pods with thin paper like, and heavily veined skin that I found in the exploration of the woods near my home. *Star*, was

created as a study of the star anise seed and *Vertebrae*, was created as a study of a beautiful fish vertebrae I found while exploring the sands of Ontario Beach. *Pregnant Pod*, situated on the wall and extending out towards the viewer, was created as a study of an unidentified seed pod and *Magnolia*, closely references the seed cone of a magnolia tree, which was collected on a recent trip to Mississippi. I hope that the viewer, upon recognizing that all of these sculptures stem from specific specimens in the collection will feel inclined to revisit it and spend even more time with it than they did upon their first encounter. *Points of Connection* is similar to these pieces in that it arose from the study of a seed pod I collected but it differs in that it is more an investigation into nature's processes than it is a study of form. More abstract than representational this work was influenced by the processes of seed dispersal and germination. One half of a seed pod with five seed compartments rests on a low pedestal. Two of the five compartments are empty of their seeds, which have already disconnected and dispersed. Of the three remaining seeds, two of them are still firmly connected to their protective shell. The third's sprout like protrusion has detached from its point of connection, leading the viewer to contemplate the process by which the missing seeds have dispersed. The magnified scale of all of this work was intended to abolish the perceived hierarchy that exists between humans and the rest of the natural world as well to set up a situation where the viewer is enticed to thoroughly investigate these forms that are now much too big to be overlooked.

Upon viewing my clay work it is my hope that the viewer will begin to question their own conceptions of nature and their place in it. The monumental quality of the sculpture arising from the magnification of these tiny forms puts them on par with the

scale of the human body and thus these specimens become, metaphorically, no longer smaller than, but equal to the human. For example, *Star*, inspired by the tiny star anise seed, closely references the form and surface of this specimen but is blown up to a scale that is roughly equivalent to the scale of the human head allowing the interaction to be not unlike a friendly conversation. With the wall pieces presented at eye level and spot lit, the viewer gains a sense of equal standing with nature.

Contained is a sculpture that not only expresses the beautiful and delicate qualities of nature but also speaks of the negative effects of human activity. A freestanding ash shelving unit, *Contained* consists of ten shelves. Hanging from the underside of each shelf are twelve etched jars with a foggy appearance for a total of one hundred and twenty. The frosted surface of these jars glows mysteriously when backlit and forces the viewer to move in very close in order to see what it inside. Each frosted jar has been rubbed with mineral oil in a few areas which gives a small yet clear window where one can peak in to see what is housed within. Coating my fingers with oil and wiping the surface of the glass in the same manor one would wipe away a dusty film of dirt, revealed what lay on the interior of the glass. The remnants of my fingerprints were intentionally left behind, to remind the viewer of the human action behind this containment. Inside each jar exists a created or found object that references a cocoon or some type of insect egg. Made of various materials such as clay, metal, wood, fiber and glass these cocoon like forms hang from the lid of the jars, in much the same way that they would have if they were actual living cocoons found in nature, attached by a single white thread. This hanging mechanism allows them to swing and sway within their jar as if they were alive. I have chosen variations of the cocoon and egg for representation and

containment in this piece because of the metaphorical qualities associated with them as well as for the fact that insects in general have a negative connotation in our society despite their ecological importance. Metaphorically, cocoons and eggs represent life, growth, metamorphosis and latent potential. However, in regard to insects, a majority of humans are afraid of these creatures and so they are often ignored, overlooked or even killed. The way in which society views insects seems to be a perfect way in which to exemplify the way we view nature as a whole, as something that is somewhat of a pest that needs to be controlled or even destroyed. “Insects make up the most numerous, diverse and successful group of animals on Earth, and only a minute percentage is harmful to or competitive with us. When scientific technology developed powerful weapons like chemical pesticides to use against them, we ended up killing thousands of species just to get at that less than one percent we find troublesome. We are now beginning to see that insects and microorganisms are vital parts of ecosystems: they form a major portion of the diets of birds, fish, mammals and amphibians, and as predators, are still the main force keeping other insects under control” (Suzuki, Dressel pg 16)

Within each of the one hundred and twenty jars, a unique and individual sculpture resides that references various cocoons or insect nests. By placing them inside these jars to be displayed in a somewhat scientific manner for close examination it was my aim to bring to light the way in which human curiosity, along with a hierarchical attitude that places all creatures below us can lead to the destruction of nature itself. I am reminded of our capture and display of exotic animals in zoos where in some cases the animal no longer exists in the wild, but lives eternally in captivity. These creatures that represent nature’s potential are contained in order that we may view them and satisfy our own

curiosity about them. Yet this very act of containment halts their natural development and ruins their potential. Whatever creatures might emerge from these cocoons and eggs will find themselves to be alienated from their natural environment and robbed of the opportunity to achieve their inherent potential. This alienation and subsequent destruction can also be seen as a metaphor for the path of our own nature-alienated species.

Conclusion

I look back on the experience of graduate school with a sense of pride and accomplishment and an eagerness to continue on the path which began at the School for American Crafts. It has been a long and difficult road and it seems to have flown by in a mere instant and the person I was when I entered graduate school has changed immensely throughout the course of this experience. I have grown in innumerable ways and learned many things. Most importantly, I walk away from this experience knowing that I have a voice and an audience and that through exhibition I have an opportunity to effect change. I understand now that creating good work is not just a physical exercise but a very complex act and that as artists we have the ability to expose to the world, the issues we feel passionately about. It is important as a human and as an artist to understand the roots of our development, and this thesis investigation has inspired me to make work that is rooted not only in process but in content. I feel that the seeds of an entire career worth of work have been sown here and I intend on continuing the investigation I have only begun to touch upon in this thesis. With the whole of nature and its complexity to explore, I will

never lack inspiration and I intend on further exposing the intricacies of our own species complex relationship with the rest of nature in an effort to inspire and effect positive change.

“It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know of wonder and humility.”

-Rachel Carson

Andy Goldworthy



**Sweet Chestnut
autumn horn**

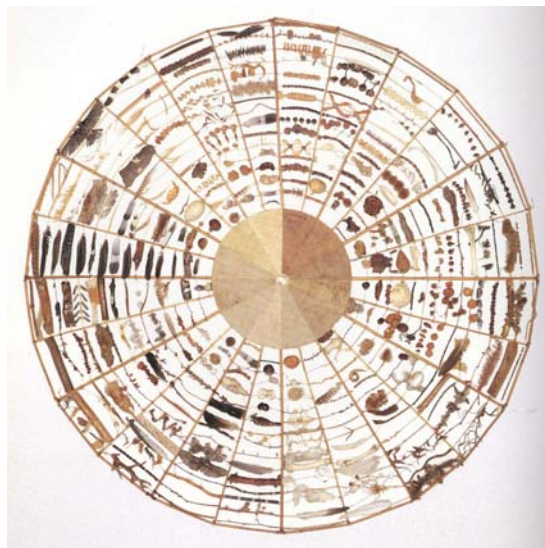
Penpoint, Dumfriesshire
November 1986



**Sumac Leaves
laid around a hole**

Storm King Art Center
October 1998

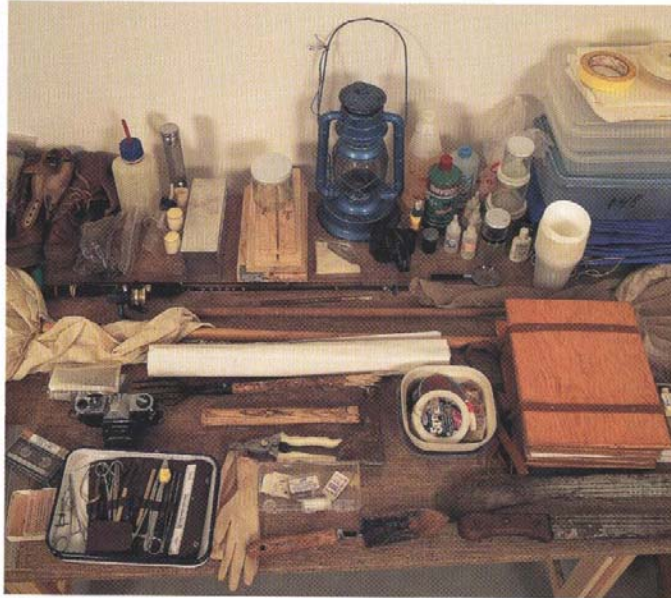
Chris Drury



Medicine Wheel

One natural object for each day of the year
twelve segments of paper, one for each month, made during that month
with the pulp of particular plants
a mushroom print
August 16th 1982-August 16th 1983

Mark Dion



On Tropical Nature, 1991

Collector's equipment, rope, string, field glasses, clothes, Plant press, killing jars, spreading boards, fish spear, insect pins, chemicals, animal traps, fishing tackle, butterfly collection, specimens, gas lamp, shoes, table, crate, shovel, gloves, plastic cups, cassette tapes, adhesive tape, camera, Tupperware containers, scissors set.

Manifestations of Nature

Bethany Krull

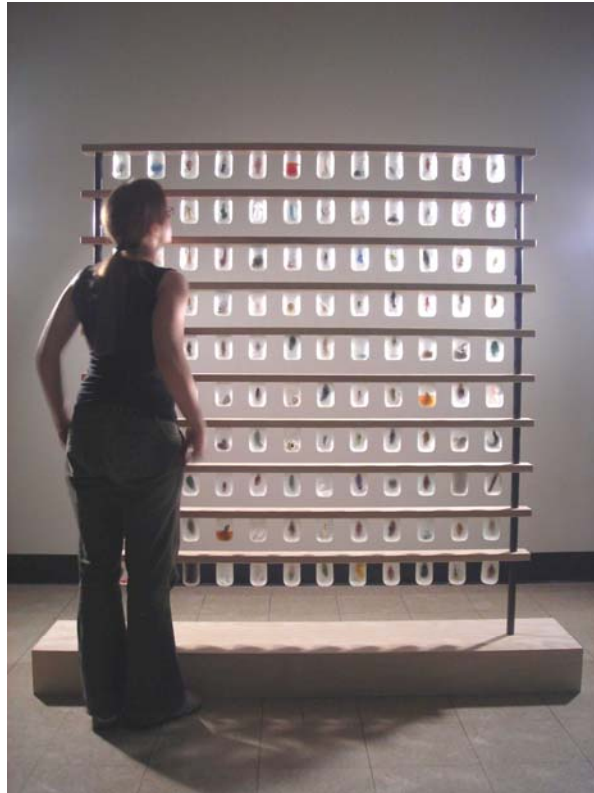


Manifestations of Nature

Collection of natural objects, glass specimen jars, ash shelves
78"L x 48"H x 6"W



Manifestations of Nature
(details)

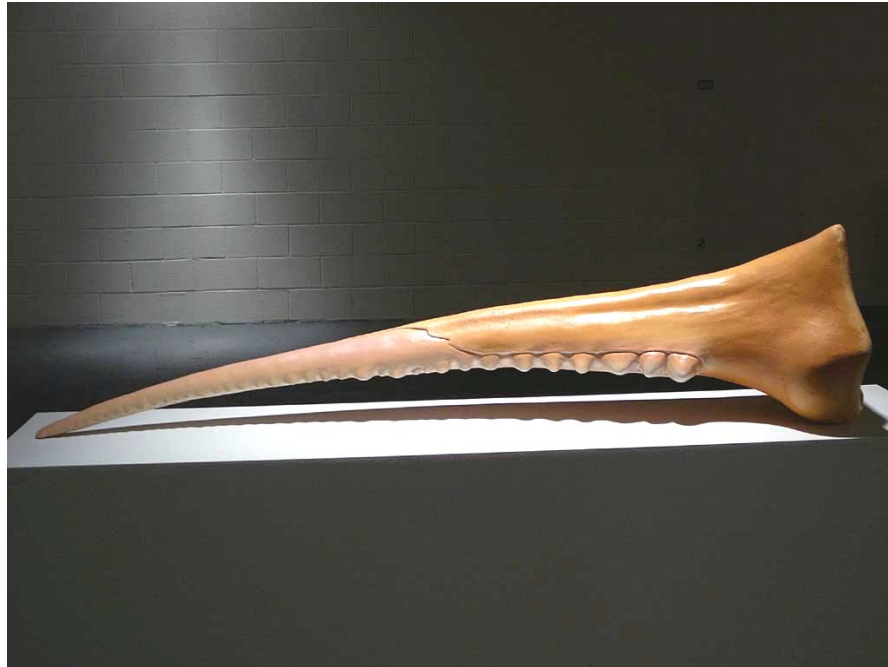


Contained

Clay and mixed media, glass jars, ash, steel
60"L x 78"H x 14"W



Contained
(details)



Pincher

Low fire clay, glaze
51"L x 13"H x 12"W



Flower Remnant

Low fire clay, glaze, steel armature
49"L x 8"H x 8"W



Seed

Low fire clay, glaze
24"L x 12"H x 12"W



Lantern Pod

Low fire clay, glaze
28"L x 36"H x 28"W



Stem

Low fire clay, glaze, steel armature
21"L x 32"H x 24"W



Segment

Low fire clay, glaze, steel armature
9"L x 5"H x 6"W



Cluster

Low fire clay, glaze
27"L x 25"H x 6"W



Star

Low fire clay, glaze, steel armature
9"L x 7"H x 4"W



Vertebrae

Low fire clay, glaze, acrylic, steel armature
8"L x 24"H x 15"W



Pregnant Pod

Low fire clay, glaze, steel armature
6"L x 12"H x 8"W



Magnolia

Low fire clay, glaze, acrylic, steel armature
5"L x 7"H x 5"W



Points of Connection

Low fire clay, glaze
49"L x 10"H x 13"W

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